

by Andrew Flagel

Revisiting High School Visits

Response to “The High School Visit” on page 108

NACAC’s anniversary is a great time to follow up on an article on high school visits, a topic of ongoing discussion in every admission and guidance office.

Let me begin by admitting that, through most of my career, I’ve held strong biases about high school visits. The limited analysis (largely anecdotal) about their impact left me skeptical.

While it’s common to overhear discussions at every level of our profession sharing these doubts, there remains an almost religious fervor for the practice. Each year hundreds (maybe thousands) of blazer-clad faithful make these pilgrimages across the country. The article highlights a variety of potential good outcomes that can be derived from collaborative interactions. Sadly, however, admission representatives are apt to be described by the guidance counselors that suffer them more like pharmaceutical reps than educational partners, while colleges and universities find weak, if any, return on often large investments.

As mentioned in the article, all too often we fail to see the most interested or talented students at a visit, or even those who remotely match our institutions. Instead we find volumes of students attending sessions only to skip class. This is exacerbated by increasingly limited availability, especially among the most competitive students, as time in classrooms increases in emphasis. Everyone’s favorite stories about visits usually surround sessions crammed into lunchrooms and hallways or those stuffed between class periods.

For the high schools, visits represent more work for guidance counselors already crushed by high student ratios and

ever-expanding assignments, from testing growth to bus duty. Worse, every year at our conference I hear guidance counselors complaining about the poor training and limited experience of the representatives that meet with them; this is not a huge surprise when so many of those representatives are only a year or two out of college. Additionally young representatives wonder why we can’t just do everything online, as they envy colleagues from the few schools that have already abandoned fall travel.

Despite all these issues, I still believe in the worth, in fact the crucial value, of these visits. Some of my best interactions with students, those that most energize me, started at high school visits. I have seen the tremendous impact that visits, when conducted thoughtfully, have on relationships with students and schools. The high school visit at its best significantly benefits the institution, the high school and the student. While the article focuses on a series of things individuals can do to make visits better (arrive on time, be respectful of each other... good advice in any setting), there are some additional things to consider to get the most out of the mutual investment in these efforts.

The three most important things are training, training and (you guessed it) training. Road runners need to be prepared to answer the real questions from guidance counselors, not mistaking this as reciting every major offered or listing the 25–75 percentile SAT range and faculty-to student ratio. Well-trained reps should be able to guide counselors through information *not* available at the click of a mouse. While I don’t believe that “fit” means a perfect match for every student, any good road warrior should be able to identify which students will likely be dissatisfied on their campuses and admit it!

The most successful visit programs are complemented by strong communication campaigns, students and counselors receiving substantive and supportive messages, both postal and electronic, before and after visits. Ideally these go into efforts to create personal connections.

I have also been impressed by institutions that have the flexibility to think about visits in dynamic ways. Some shift times to before or after school, others hold modified receptions or individual counseling sessions for students or counselors, or online chats via instant messaging or Skype or FaceTime.

The college admission process is complex, and continues to be challenging for students from every school and socioeconomic background. Perhaps it’s an old-fashioned sentiment, but nothing we offer, even the best Web sites or the most brilliant direct mail campaigns, will replace direct person-to-person interaction. To be more than sales people, however, requires a concentrated effort, thoughtfulness, planning, and investment in an already expensive process. The burden of making high school visits worthwhile is shared by guidance professionals and college representatives, but those in higher education should take on the bulk of the responsibility. We are the visitors, interrupting to make our pitches. In deference to the process, we must go beyond that pitch to change lives for the better. And that, my dear colleagues, is very much worth our time.



ANDREW FLAGEL is senior vice president for students and enrollment at Brandeis University (MA). He served on the NACAC Seal of Approval Committee and has been the NACAC Membership Committee chair. His blog is featured on mycollegeoptions.org.